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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH SIEM REAP GOVERNOR SOU PHIRIN

REF: PHNOM PENH 379

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. NOT FOR INTERNET DISSEMINATION.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: During an August 21 meeting with Siem Reap Governor Sou Phirin (joined by other government officials such as the Siem Reap Prosecutor and Military Commander), the Ambassador discussed H1N1 prevention methods, tourism and tourist safety, trafficking in persons, and land issues. The Ambassador highlighted a recent child sexual exploitation case involving an American citizen as well as ongoing land disputes. END SUMMARY.

The State of Siem Reap

12. (SBU) The Ambassador began the meeting by asking the governor about the state of the economy in Siem Reap. Sou Phirin expressed his thanks to the United States for allowing exports from Cambodia and for their role in sustaining Cambodia's garment industry. On tourism, the governor spotlighted its safety and affordability, and noted that although Siem Reap has seen a decline in visitors overall, there has been an increase in visitors from North America. He expressed a desire for a full U.S. economic recovery, noting Cambodia's dependence on the U.S. economy.
H1N1 and Tourist Safety

13. (SBU) The Ambassador asked Phirin about precautions to prevent the spread of H1N1 among Siem Reap's visitors and its local population. The governor responded that there were only seven reported cases of H1N1 in Siem Reap, all of which involved visitors from the United States, Pakistan, Thailand, Nigeria, and the Philippines. He claimed that no Cambodians had been infected so far. In an effort to prevent the spread of H1N1, passengers from international flights are screened at the airport and prevention information is provided daily via radio and television announcements. The governor stated that officials would make every effort to care for suspected H1N1 patients within Siem Reap but, if necessary, they would be transferred to Phnom Penh for treatment.
Trafficking in Persons and Sex Tourism

14. (SBU) The Ambassador reaffirmed the United States' commitment to pursuing legal action against Americans who commit sex crimes within Cambodia. She expressed surprise that Jack Sporich, an American citizen and convicted sex offender, was released on bail after six months in pre-trial detention within Siem Reap province. (NOTE: To the Embassy's knowledge, no other prisoner has been released on bail after their initial six-month detention period.) The Prosecutor stated that Sporich was facing charges for indecent acts -a misdemeanor that carries a maximum sentence of three years in prison. Persons charged with a misdemeanor cannot be held in pre-trial detention for more than six months under Cambodian law. As Sporich had already been detained for over six months, his lawyer was able to argue successfully for his release. The Ambassador appealed to the governor to consider the potential damage to Cambodia's reputation if it is seen as a place where it is easy to abuse children. She urged the governor to be vigilant in fighting trafficking and abuses against women and children.

15. (SBU) The governor stated that he fully supported the Ambassador's remarks and that he too wanted to enhance the rights of women and children. Governor Sou Phirin added that while Sporich was accused of indecent acts, he had not been accused of rape

because he was caught trying to persuade a young boy into his home, not in the process of, or after the fact of rape. That was the factual basis that made the difference between charges for "indecent acts" and more serious felony charges. (NOTE: Sporich returned to the United States in the custody of U.S. officials on August 30 under authority of the PROTECT ACT.) The Ambassador added that it is the responsibility of government officials and development partners to provide more education and job opportunities and improve the health of the local population in order to discourage child sex tourism.

Land Disputes

¶6. (SBU) Noting that the Embassy regularly receives information related to land disputes from NGOs and individuals, the Ambassador asked for the governor's perspective on land cases. Governor Phirin stated that land disputes within Siem Reap stem from one of two categories: the first involves the use of land that belongs to the state; the second pertains to the succession of land ownership from the former generation before 1975. Governor Phirin stated that most land cases were not difficult to resolve as the parties involved were inclined to settle them via commune council arbitration. He stated that the commune councils also attempted to settle the disputes involving the landless and poor.

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador mentioned that she has heard of cases involving violence and urged that they be resolved peacefully. (NOTE: One of Siem Reap's most recent land dispute cases involving violence was between the Chi Kraeng and Anlong Samnor communes. Police officers entering the commune to issue an arrest warrant fired shots and injured three people. See Reftel.) Governor Phirin stated that the government wants to conciliate and mediate land dispute problems, and expressed regret that provincial authorities had used guns in the Chi Kraeng case.

COMMENT

¶8. (SBU) The governor spoke openly during the meeting and seemed particularly attentive to the strong economic ties between the U.S. and Cambodia represented by tourism and foreign assistance. The governor also seemed open to continued collaboration between Cambodia and the U.S. in Siem Reap.

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